

Waxman Stands by Liberal Credo September 17, 1995

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By Sara Catania

On a recent sun-bleached morning, a trio of supplicants paraded across the plush blue carpet in Rep. Henry Waxman's Westside district office, paying homage to the liberal Democrat and seeking his aid.

A Unitarian church group denounced plans to put student-led prayer in the Constitution. Home health-care providers fretted over services for the elderly. The American Lung Association bestowed an award, urging the congressman to continue pressing for tougher tobacco laws. A year ago, with Democrats firmly ensconced in the majority, Waxman could have confidently pledged to protect these constituents. Indeed, for more than two decades, he has persistently, persuasively championed legislation on environmental protection, tobacco regulation, and health care.

During the Reagan-Bush years, he pushed through the Clean Air Act, helped extend Medicaid benefits to millions of working poor and led the charge against attempts to cap Social Security. And he used his position as chairman of a powerful House subcommittee to pummel tobacco executives and push for a ban on smoking in public places.

How times have changed.

In January, when the Republicans gained control of Congress, they stripped Waxman of his chairmanship and launched a full assault on the very laws and issues on which he has built his career.

"No one is facing a greater challenge to his entire legislative accomplishments than Henry Waxman," said Rep. Howard Berman, D-Panorama City, a longtime friend and political ally. "This is really the biggest challenge he's had since he got into elected office." In this era of Newt Gingrich and the Contract with America, many Democrats are distancing themselves from the party's traditional role as champion of the downtrodden and advocate of what Republicans derisively call "big government."

But even as Bill Clinton and many of Waxman's colleagues gravitate to the center, the 56-year-old legislator is digging in his liberal heels.

"If I wanted to be trendy I could put on a new set of political views just to match the moment," Waxman said. "But that's not what I'm interested in."

What Waxman is interested in is making sure the government picks up where the free market leaves off. That means finding funding for AIDS, making sure children are not encouraged to smoke and, above all, seeing to it that the powerless are cared for.

"If we don't have a government program to provide a safety net for the very poor, there's no way they're not going to be brought to lows that are degrading them and their humanity," he said.

"If we end up with a country that's made up of the haves and the have-nots, the haves are not going to be able to afford enough bodyguards to protect them from the have-nots."

Those liberal views still play well in his well-heeled district, made up of Santa Monica, West Los Angeles, Beverly Hills, most of Hollywood and a slice of the east San Fernando Valley including parts of Sherman

Oaks, Studio City, Van Nuys and a small section of North Hollywood. First elected in 1974, he has consistently held his seat with more than 60 percent of the vote. In 1994 he captured 68 percent.

But that district is a far cry from the "Middle America" Republicans claim to represent. The question facing Waxman is whether he will be able to continue to make his voice heard, or be marginalized by Republicans.

Nobody's ready to write Waxman off yet.

"A guy like Henry understands things too well to sit around and cry in his beer," said Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Simi Valley, whose conservative views on many issues veer 180 degrees from Waxman's. "He could be a master at undermining (the Republican agenda)," Gallegly said.

Richard Lichtenstein, a Democratic political consultant, concurs. "The easy story would be Liberal congressman neutered by Newt," he said. "I don't think Henry's been neutered. Maybe caged would be a better way to put it."

If Waxman has been locked away, he is determined to find the key. It lies somewhere behind the scenes, in the world of persuasion and dealmaking that this summer foiled the first round of Republican attacks on environmental protection laws and spurred Clinton to call for sweeping regulations to curb teen smoking.

Tobacco interests gave a sigh of relief when Waxman lost his chairmanship of the Subcommittee on Health and the Environment. Rep. Thomas Bliley, R-Va., won the chairmanship of the full Energy and Commerce Committee (renamed the Commerce Committee by the Republicans). In that role, Bliley promptly called off the Waxman-led investigation that subjected tobacco CEOs to unwanted public scrutiny and splashed Waxman's short, bald image across television screens and newspapers around the country.

But Waxman has not let up. Twice in July the former smoker stood on the floor of the House and read from documents he said revealed that tobacco giant Philip Morris studied the impact of smoking on hyperactive youths.

Less than a month later, at Waxman's urging, Clinton called for a ban on vending machine sales of cigarettes, sharp new limits on tobacco company sponsorship of sports events and advertising aimed at young people. And he proposed giving the U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulatory authority over tobacco, which prompted an angry reaction and immediate suit by the tobacco companies.

"We're unaware of any reduction of the heat factor," said Thomas Lauria, spokesman for the Tobacco Institute, the lobbying group for the industry. "When Waxman lost the chairmanship, it followed quickly with other avenues of attack. He went to the White House and got more influential people to back it. He just resorts to different tactics."

Those tactics also came in handy when the Republicans muscled a bill through the House to undercut the federal environmental regulations Waxman worked so hard to establish. Waxman argued strenuously against the measure. When it passed, he shifted his efforts to Republicans in the more moderate Senate, gaining enough support to stall the measure a harsh rebuff to Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, who was forced to set the bill aside.

Waxman speaks proudly of that effort, using it to illustrate his new role running interference for the Democrats.

"My job now is to watch where the openings are," he said. "The openings are different than where they were in the past."

Waxman's determination to find chinks in the Republican armor is rooted in family tradition. As a child, he lived with his sister and parents in a modest flat above his father's grocery store near Watts. His father, an ardent New-Dealer and first-generation Russian Jew, schooled Waxman in the finer points of liberal politics.

"My father was a very big influence on me," Waxman said. "He went over the issues with me from his own personal experience during the Depression what the efforts of President Roosevelt and the Democratic Party meant to him as a young person who was forced to quit school and was struggling to make a living."

Waxman turned those lessons to advantage while still in college, forming a friendship and political alliance with like-minded classmate Howard Berman. With Berman's help, Waxman was first elected to the state Assembly at 29. Berman followed shortly after.

Eventually the two launched a concerted effort to fund raise for campaigns of potential allies, a highly successful practice that helped elect numerous office seekers, raising the ire of opponents who dubbed the effort the Waxman-Berman machine.

In recent years, however, Waxman's interest in local races has waned, and the Waxman-Berman team has propelled few candidates into office. Waxman attributes the change to a shift in his own interests away from local politics.

To be sure, Waxman now has his hands full looking for ways to foil the Republicans. In the coming weeks, he hopes to drive a wedge between conservative and moderate Republicans wide enough to squelch a plan to cut \$270 billion in Medicare money the Republicans say supports unnecessary bureaucracy and subsidizes care for those who could afford to pay more. Waxman counters that without the funds, needy senior citizens will go without necessary care.

"I'm going to be very actively involved in those fights," he said. "I may not be able to change the vote in the House, but we hope to change public opinion. We hope to bring the Senate's attention to the issues at stake, and strengthen the president to veto the bill if he needs to." Such words from a master persuader are not spoken lightly. Recall, for example, the hearing in Waxman's subcommittee in the spring of 1994 when he coaxed a majority of his colleagues to vote for a measure to ban smoking in most public places.

Through sheer persistence, and a willingness to exempt restaurants and bars from the ban, Waxman prevailed. The proposal never made it to the House floor, but the committee vote got major play on the network news, and Waxman used the presence of the cameras to full effect.

"I didn't have the faintest idea whether we had the votes or not, and usually chairmen don't go in and call a meeting and call a vote without knowing whether they are going to prevail or not," he recalled. "But I did it because I just thought if we had visibility for the issue, which we did because we had the cameras there, then it would be hard for some of some of those members to vote with the tobacco industry."

While Waxman's new role on the national scene continues to unfold, his significance in the battle for bailout funds for floundering Los Angeles County is clear.

Waxman's support of government-funded health care has played a key role in negotiations between Los Angeles County and the federal government for a waiver of Medicare rules first would bring in \$178 million to help keep the county's six hospitals open.

"The waiver is the most important component of the rescue plan," said Burt Margolin, the city's health czar and Waxman ally. "Henry Waxman is critical to making it happen."

Sitting in his Los Angeles office, Waxman pulls an overnight bag from underneath his bare desk, preparing for the long flight to Washington and the big fights ahead.

"In difficult situations the only prediction you can make is if you don't push you don't get," he said. "If you do push, you hope people will change."